

# No Greater Burde

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Date: 17 April 2005

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[ 0 : 00 ] I hear some praise. Almighty God, you alone can order our unruly wills and affections grant to us that we may love the things that you command and desire the things you promise.

So that among the many changes in this world our hearts might be fixed there where true joys are to be found. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Well it would be great if you would open up in Acts chapter 15 where Jane just read for us a moment ago page 127, back of the Bible. And as you do that, many of you know, I remember Bill Lovell who worked on staff here at St John's a number of years ago, brought a mission team up from Dallas in November.

What you may not know is that Mrs Lovell has a very naughty sense of humour and often plays practical jokes on anyone within range.

And as some of you probably do know, Bill Lovell, Richard James and I flew to a conference in London when they were here. The plane got up to cruising altitude and the stewardess came down just before the meal to our row and she said, Rabbi James, Rabbi Short, your special meals are prepared.

[ 1 : 41 ] And I began to explain, I'm not a rabbi, and when I realised the bill was not included I figured out there was more to here than meets the eye.

I say that because some people think that Acts 15 is all about kosher food. But there's more here than meets the eye. Last week we came to Acts 15 which is the summit and pinnacle in a way of the book of Acts.

Everything leads up, everything flows out. And in the two chapters before Acts 15 Barnabas and Paul have been taking the gospel outside of Israel and men and women have come to faith in the Lord Jesus Christ despite terrible persecution and suffering.

And now a different form of opposition has arisen from within the church. A group of Pharisees used to be Pharisees who've now become Christians are appalled that these Gentiles are moving into the church without taking on all the Old Testament ceremonial practices.

They said you can't be saved without circumcision and the law. So the council of Jerusalem meets the elders and the apostles. And if you look in verse 9 of Acts 15 you'll find that the apostle Peter says salvation does not come by nationality or race, colour of skin.

[ 3 : 09 ] It comes by the action of God cleansing our hearts by faith in Jesus Christ. But all the external ceremonies point to this one who can do the inward work of cleansing our hearts.

And in verse 11 Peter says we believe that we shall be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus just as they will and there you have the Christian faith. In some ways that's the summit of the book. That's what it means to be a Christian. That's what it means to be a church. That there is this salvation, this cleansing which is outside us which we cannot manufacture, we cannot create and it's available to us in the Lord Jesus Christ and it comes to us as we place our faith in him.

And as I said last week it's a terrible blow to human arrogance because it says that by ourselves and of ourselves we are all of us unacceptable and contaminated in his sight and that God has put forward one way in which we receive his salvation it is purely by faith in the undeserved, magnificent, unspeakably brilliant grace of God in Jesus Christ.

And so the council says what shall we do? We will turn to scripture and they turn to scripture in verse 15 and they find this is what God has been saying all along. So when they write the letter in verse 28 you remember as Jane read it to us they said it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to make this decision.

[ 4 : 34 ] The reason they know it seemed good to the Holy Spirit is because it's written in the Old Testament scriptures and they don't take a vote but the Apostle James makes the ruling in verses

19 and 20 I remind you of those I just want to read those to you.

Verse 19 Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God who convert literally to God but should write to them to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity from what is strangled and from blood.

And then they write a letter in verse 22 and there's a lovely spirit of fellowship and care. They don't just throw it in the post give it to a courier they send people with this letter and right from the start there is this sense of equality.

If you look at the beginning of the letter in verse 23 they begin the brothers both the apostles and elders to the brothers who are Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Silesia there's no class system in the Christian faith there's no elite superior they are greeted with deep affection and then they report the decision that I've just read.

Now I want to step back today and I want us to look at this decision in the council under two headings translation and transformation. The first idea the translation of the gospel I want to explain what I mean.

[ 6 : 04 ] Laman Sané some of you have met him he's a black West African who grew up in Islam converted to Christianity taught world Christianity and Islamic studies in Harvard and now teaches world Christianity in Yale.

He says there are two opposite ways to do mission represented by Islam and Christianity. He says what Islam does is it makes a particular culture a carrier of its message.

He says this is mission by diffusion. So in Islam Arabic is the language of heaven. All prayers in the mosques are prayed in Arabic.

The Quran is in Arabic and becoming a Muslim is a matter of cultural identity. The faith travels along cultural traditions which is one of the reasons perhaps why Islam has not had a reformation. But he says by contrast Christianity does the opposite. Christianity does mission by translation. You see the decision of the council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 demonstrates that Christianity cannot be restricted to one particular culture but it finds expression in every particular culture through this process of translation.

[ 7 : 28 ] And when people come to know the Lord Jesus Christ in their own tongue they know the real Lord Jesus Christ and what it does is this. They receive the gospel, they understand the gospel, they relate to the true and living God in their own vernacular and it enables them to be self-critical and critical of the culture in which they live and it enables them to be critical of the culture of those who brought the gospel to them.

Which of course is what is happening in the Anglican world right now as it is the Christians in Africa who are calling North America and England back to the gospel. mission by translation means that every culture is a possible place of the saving work of God.

You remember back at the day of Pentecost in Acts chapter 3 when the Holy Spirit fell there were people there from every nation under heaven we're told and they heard the gospel in their own tongue demonstrating there's no one culture that impresses God above others.

It is possible that the gospel may be translated into every culture and God's intention is to bring it into every nation and every land and every tongue by translating the gospel into the vernacular.

Remember in chapter 7 when Stephen is stoned he preaches that long sermon and the point is that God is not confined by geographic or cultural boundaries. He says think about this he says the story of Israel did not begin in Israel it began when God appeared to Abram out on the plains of Mesopotamia.

[ 9 : 04 ] Again in chapter 10 God has to appear to Peter three times so that he will meet with the Gentile Cornelius and preach the gospel to him. And in the last two chapters we've seen as Paul and Barnabas have preached the gospel in pagan Roman Greek culture.

Cyprus you remember magicians, Antioch, people turn to the Lord Jesus Christ they receive the forgiveness of sins and the gift of the Holy Spirit and they don't have to adopt any particular culture. And the reason for this is the culture extends far beyond any sorry the gospel extends far beyond any particular culture because the gospel is about the absolute grace of God in the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ and everything else is relative to that now.

Since the death and resurrection of Jesus there is no culture that can claim to be superior or right above others. because Christianity is a vernacular religion.

That is why Christians throughout history have learned other tongues and taken the good news into a new language. We sit here this morning, Sharon Thompson who used to be a member of St. [10:17] John's making a relatively decent income in the money market is now in Burkino Faso in Africa translating the Bible into Boimu.

Why is she doing that? It's not philanthropy, it's the nature of the gospel. What happens here in Acts 15 is the early Christians recognise that the gospel cannot be contained within the walls of Judaism or any other culture.

It is free to take hold of people in any tongue and in any place which is a very dangerous thing because the gospel never leaves us where we are.

When it is translated into our tongue it then begins a process of transformation which brings us to the second point. So in verse 20 I move now from the translation of the gospel to the transformation of the gospel.

Verse 20 shows us that the Christian faith is not just about redemption and forgiveness. But it's about ongoing transformation and change. Because when the gospel goes into a culture it doesn't just blend in but it expresses itself in that culture by radical change.

[11:35] Look again at verse 20. I'll just remind you of the terms of the radical change. They say we should write to the Gentiles to abstain from the pollutions of idols and from unchastity and from what is strangled and from blood.

I pointed out last week these are not three random cultural sensitivities. They are three permanent principles for the Christian life derived from God's law.

No idolatry, no sexual immorality, no violence. Our relationship with God, with sexuality and with others.

It's very interesting. In the first century when Judaism began to spread across the Roman Empire, which it did before then, in the dispersion the rabbis were forced to ask the question, how do we relate to those who have had no contact with the revelation of God?

What can be our moral expectations? So they searched through the Old Testament for any universalizing passages and they first went to Genesis 4 to 11 before Israel had been created.

[12:45] And what they found was that God condemned three kinds of sin, idolatry, sexual immorality and violence. And then they went to the Levitical Code to see what the laws were that governed the resident aliens, non-Jews, who lived in the land.

And they found in Leviticus 17 to 24 there are three kinds of laws for the resident alien, governing idolatry, sexual immorality and violence. And then they came to the prophets and the prophets preach about God's condemnation of the nations outside of Israel.

And the basis of God's judgment of those nations are three kinds of sin, immorality, idolatry and violence. That's why it's very striking you see that the same structure of moral life under the old covenant is exactly the same structure of moral life under the new covenant.

Or if you look down in verse 28 when they write this letter they say these three principles are necessary things. They're essential, indispensable to gospel living.

They're not secondary but primary. And when the apostle Paul later in 1 Corinthians goes to meditate on the life of the church between chapters 5 and chapter 10 he demonstrates that idolatry and immorality and violence are the boundaries of fellowship.

[14:08] Now I want to ask the question with you this morning. How would you describe the Canadian culture on these three issues? I mean how do these things reveal themselves in our culture?

Take idolatry for example. We don't carve little wooden objects and then set them up and bow down to them anymore. Our idolatry is much more sophisticated.

Although I did read in the newspaper on Monday at the Scottish Soccer Cup semifinal the organisers had arranged a one minute silence in honour of Pope John Paul.

And during the minute the Scottish fans started to boo and jeer. And they did it so much that the referee had to blow his whistle after 20 seconds. Now afterwards John Robertson who is the manager of the Scottish Football Association said and I quote, football is my religion.

He said people have different beliefs and my belief is football and that is all I am concerned with. Isn't that a wonderful statement of idolatry? I mean I don't mean to be banal but I wonder whether celebrity and money have become in a way perhaps never before common idolatry.

[ 15 : 33 ] I mean as Canadians we've developed a culture of celebrity which I think has been helped along by this very aptly titled television program called Canadian Idol.

And the whole way that we think about money has shifted some of the basic beliefs and dreams substituted quantity or quality. Money has become the only purpose for living.

Someone passed me this little brochure that they received in a hotel. It's called True Redemption. And I think it's about redeeming hotel points at different places.

And on this page there's a picture of a lovely swimming pool and it says make a splash one pool at a time. Now that's True Redemption. And then there's a golf course and it says put your game to the ultimate test.

Now that's True Redemption. And then there's a picture of a ski hill. Ski season starts when you say it does. Now that's True Redemption. I think it was Kierkegaard who said give me money and I am saved.

[ 16 : 40 ] I think that's some of the ways idolatry functions in our culture. Or take sexual immorality. The Greek word here for sexual immorality is the word pornea.

And it describes all sexual behaviour outside God-ordained marriage. Now pornography is not new but pornography has become a huge issue, a \$57 billion a year industry worldwide.

The US porn industry revenue is larger than the combined revenues of all professional football, baseball and basketball franchising. A child pornography generates \$3 billion annually.

The average age of child in Canada first is exposed to pornography online is 11 years old. And 90% of eight 16 year olds have viewed porn online.

One of the major shifts that we have seen in the last 40 years in North America is the number of couples who live together before they're married.

[ 17 : 57 ] Each year in the United States there's a think tank that puts out a wonderfully titled report called The State of Our Unions. In the United States between 1960 and 2002 the number of couples who are living together as sexual partners without being married increased 1,100%.

I say this to you in terms of, in Bible terms, cohabitation is pornea. It's sexual immorality. Or take violence.

In Canada, spousal violence and violence against older people have steadily risen since 1998. I think one of the most significant contributions that Pope John Paul made was to introduce into public discourse this phrase, the culture of death.

In his encyclical called The Gospel of Life, he delivered shaking. I think the Pope took particular aim at abortion and euthanasia.

And in Canada, abortions have grown from 11,000 in 1970 to 105,000 in the year 2000.

[ 19 : 09 ] And that doesn't include chemical abortions or the morning after pill. Now the Council of Jerusalem comes to us and says, you are saved by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ.

That he cleanses our hearts by faith in him. And that God creates a new community of people who are marked by worship of God, by sexual purity, and by peace and care of others.

Gospel, because it is so absolutely and totally of God's grace, makes an absolute and total demand of our lives. And the direction and compass for our moral lives comes not from the culture, but from the Gospel.

The moral structure of life that the Holy Spirit gives us and Christians in China and Africa is the same.

How we relate to God and to our sexuality and our neighbours demonstrates the transforming power of the Gospel. And what this letter from the Council of Jerusalem says to us is that it is our role as a church to transform the culture not to be transformed by the culture.

[ 20 : 27 ] And no, we can't avoid some of that. Rather than copying the individualism and the materialism and the relativism of the culture, we are to be different.

In fact, our effectiveness as a Christian body here and other Christian bodies is tied to how different we are. Ronald Sider is a well-known North American Christian thinker, writer.

His latest book is called The Scandal of the Evangelical Conscience. He says he wrote the book with a broken heart. He says there's very little evidence of the transforming power of the Holy Spirit amongst evangelicals.

There's very little difference between how we live and the culture lives round about us. He says that Christians get divorced just as often as the general population.

He says that a third of evangelicals say that premarital sex is okay and that 15% say that adultery is okay. He says physical and sexual abuse in theologically conservative homes is about the same as the national average, although evangelical men who attend church regularly are less likely than the general population to commit domestic violence.

[ 21 : 49 ] The Sider is scandalised by our materialism. He says that the average church member gives about 2.6% of his or her annual income to the church, about a quarter of a time.

He makes the point that if American Christians tithe, there would be an extra \$143 billion for Christian ministry. Now I think it's a little different than what we see in the book of Acts. And the church goes through periods of faithfulness and unfaithfulness. But I say again that our effectiveness and our integrity is tied to whether we live what we preach.

There's a deep connection between what's happening inside the church and our spiritual usefulness to those outside. The Apostle Paul says, Be blameless and innocent, children as light, without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation among whom you shine. Among whom you shine as lights in the world. And that's why this chapter is so important to us. Because it holds together the grace of God and the transforming power of the Holy Spirit.

[ 23 : 05 ] It doesn't limit salvation to the forgiveness of my sins as a kind of eternal fire insurance policy. But it says that that grace, when it overwhelms me, leads to a life of worship and purity and peace.

It's not saying that we are morally perfect. All of us, Paul, and all of us are guilty of these sins continually. But it is saying that open hypocrisy is not just a scandal to those outside, but it shows that we haven't really understood the transforming power of Christ.

I want to say that the Bible never says to us, Pull up your socks. It doesn't say, Try harder, be better. You know, floss. Because this transformation cannot come from our own moral strength. It can only come from the Gospel, from the transforming power of the cleansing, comes from Jesus Christ. I want to show you how this works. Just before the Council of Jerusalem, the Apostle Paul wrote a letter to the Gentile churches where these Jewish teachers had gone interrupting his work, the letter of Galatians.

I just want you to turn over to it for a moment. If you have your Bible open, would you turn right to page 179, to Galatians chapter 5, how do we change?

[ 24 : 43 ] How do we just settle down and give up? In verse 16 of Galatians 5, Paul says, That I say, Walk by the Spirit and do not gratify the desires of the flesh.

The desires of the flesh are against the Spirit. The desires of the Spirit against the flesh. They are opposed to each other to prevent you from doing what you would. But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.

Now the works of the flesh are play. Fornication, which is porneia, impurity, licentiousness, idolatry, sorcery, enmity, strife, jealousy, anger, selfishness, dissension, party spirit, envy, drunkenness, arousing and the like.

I warn you, as I warned you before, that those who do such things will not inherit the kingdom of God. But, the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control.

Against those, sorry, against these, there is no law. And those who belong to Christ Jesus have crucified the flesh with its passions and desires. If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

[ 26 : 09 ] Real change and growth does not come from the grim moral determination of doing ethical exercises. It comes from being crucified with Jesus Christ.

It comes from knowing Him and clinging to Him and abiding in Him and walking with Him and receiving His cleansing, forgiving Spirit. Goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, self-control, we can't manufacture those in our own hearts by ourselves.

They are the fruit of the Spirit. So I want to conclude with this question. If that's so, then how do we walk by the Spirit?

How do we cling to Christ? How do we bring His cleansing power into our lives in such a way that He grows His fruit through us? And I want to go back to Acts 15 to finish with this.

There's something very strange that happens at the end of the Acts 15 passage in verses 30 to 35. So when they were sent off, in verse 30, they went down to Antioch and having gathered the congregation together, they delivered the letter and when they heard it, they rejoiced at the exhortation.

[ 27 : 34 ] Judas and Silas, who were prophets, exhorted the brethren many words and strengthened them. And after they had spent some time, they were sent off in peace by the brethren to those who had sent them.

But Paul and Barnabas remained in Antioch teaching and literally evangelizing the word of the Lord with many others also. Here is a picture of the reception of the letter.

And it says to us that Christian life, Christian existence is marked by two things. And the first is this, it is profoundly communal. The picture of gospel transformation is almost the opposite to individualism.

It's not individuals who are struggling separately from each other, but people who, by faith in Jesus Christ, who have been born, brought into a new kind of community, who draw strength from each other together, being gathered and are accountable to others by the grace of God.

have you ever noticed that the services we share together here on Sundays are common prayer?

[ 28 : 43 ] We do not come together and say that I may perfectly love you. We say that we may perfectly love you, that our hearts may be open, that our Lord Jesus Christ said, that Lord have mercy on us.

When we confess our sins, we say, we acknowledge and we earnestly repent. This is something we do together as a community because trying to do it on your own will inevitably lead to hypocrisy.

God says, if you want to grow into the image of my son, you can only do that as you grow together.

What the gospel does is it creates a community centered into and that his grace is lived out in that community.

That's the first thing. The second is, the community lives under the joyful authority of the apostolic gospel. You notice the words in those verses that the mutual strengthening and encouraging and nurturing comes from the teaching and preaching and exhorting of the gospel.

In verse 31, do you not think it's very strange that we are told that they rejoiced at the exhortation?

They don't just rejoice in the fact that they don't have to become Jews.

[ 30 : 02 ] What gives them joy is the exhortation that the shape of their lives is not an additional extra but part of what it means to be cleansed by Jesus Christ because our fellowship is fostered as we seek to worship and live lives of purity and peace.

belonging to each other means we are a fellowship of the Holy Spirit because of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God. Amen.